

Network in Focus 2019

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This year's European Network of Ombudsmen conference in April brought us to the European Parliament just ahead of a hugely important moment for European democracy. I would like to thank all of you who participated for your valuable contributions, and hope that this publication provides useful insight for both those who were with us in Brussels and those who could not make it.

With the European elections imminent, this year's conference provided an ideal platform to discuss participatory democracy and the role ombudsman institutions can play in promoting this. The EU's Chief Negotiator for Brexit, Michel Barnier, provided us with food for thought on the importance of getting participatory democracy right, notably in the context of the complexity associated with the decision by the United Kingdom to withdraw from the European Union.

Apart from the elections, and the importance of encouraging all voters to use their franchise, we looked at other aspects of public participation in the democratic process, whether at EU or national level. We heard about new initiatives on public mobilisation and participation in civic life, and how existing structures and institutions need to adapt these.

The conference explored some of the external influences relevant to our work, such as changing demographics or the new EU rules on data protection. It also explored how ombudsman institutions can have even greater impact by maximising how we use our 'soft powers'. As you know, the chief motivation for hosting the conference in Brussels is to connect with the EU institutions based here. Our joint sessions with SOLVIT were a concrete manifestation of this. I hope you all drew as much benefit as I did from our discussions on some of the common cross-border issues on which we work, in particular healthcare and other social rights and benefits for those who work and live in other EU countries.

We have modernised this year's edition of *Network in Focus* by transforming it into a digital publication. The purpose and content remains the same: giving you the highlights of the discussion points during our conference. We also want to highlight that the revamp of the ENO's extranet is almost finished, and will be online later this year. We hope you will also find this a useful resource, and that it will serve as an even more useful platform for co-operation.

I hope the conference provided you with inspiration and new ideas, as it has done for my office. It has been an honour for me to host the ENO conferences in Brussels for the past few years,



and I thank you all for your engagement and camaraderie.

My best wishes,

Emily O'Reilly, European Ombudsman